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OFFICIAL UNITED STATES STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF SLAUGHTER LAMBS, YEARLINGS, AND SHEEP

(Title 7, Ch. I, Pt. 53, Sections 53.133 - 53.144 of the Code of Federal Regulations)

The following is a reprint of the official United States standards for the grades of slaughter lambs, yearlings, and sheep heretofore promulgated by the Secretary of Agriculture under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 (60 Stat. 1087; 7 U.S.C. 1621 et seq.) as amended by Public Law 272, 84th Congress. The standards are reprinted with amendments effective June 18, 1960.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STANDARDS

Tentative United States Standards for the Market Classes and Grades of Slaughter Lambs and Sheep were prepared in 1917 to provide a basis on which the Federal Market News Service might issue market quotations on these animals, according to a uniform classification. Preliminary grade descriptions were mimeographed and distributed. Suggestions for their improvement were solicited and received from producers, animal husbandmen, market agencies, and slaughterers. These suggestions were used in further perfecting the standards.

Late in 1926 and early 1927, public hearings were held in Portland (Oreg.), San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Denver, Fort Worth, Kansas City, Omaha, St. Paul, Chicago, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Invitations to attend these hearings were sent to livestock producers, slaughterers, wholesale and retail dealers, agricultural college workers, and others interested in the livestock and meat industries. The sentiment developed in these hearings was decidedly in favor of the standardized grades for lambs, yearlings, and sheep, as presented. Criticisms and suggestions brought out in these hearings were given careful consideration in later revisions of the tentative standards, which were printed in March, 1936, Circular No. 383. The circular was slightly revised in July, 1940.

The tentative standards for grades of slaughter sheep were revised and promulgated by the Secretary of Agriculture as the official United States standards for grades of slaughter lambs, yearlings, and sheep, effective April 30, 1951. These standards were issued as Service and Regulatory Announcements No. 168. The revisions in the tentative standards, at the time of their promulgation as official standards, combined the Prime and Choice grades and designated them as Prime. The Good grade was renamed Choice, which also became the highest grade for

which slaughter sheep older than yearlings are eligible. The top two-thirds of the Medium grade was renamed Good; the lower one-third of the Medium Grade was combined with the upper two-thirds of the Common grade and designated as Utility; and the lower one-third of the Common grade was combined with the Cull grade and designated as Cull. The revisions also provided for indicating in the standards the minimum requirements for each grade and specified the grade requirements at varying degrees of maturity.

In February, 1957, revisions were made in the slaughter sheep standards to coordinate them with changes made in the carcass lamb and sheep standards. The quality requirements for the Prime and Choice grade were reduced for the more mature lambs. In the Good grade, the quality requirements were increased slightly, particularly for very young lambs. Another major change made in the standards was to permit sheep and lambs with quality indications sufficient for only the upper one-third of the Good grade to be graded Choice provided they have at least mid-point Choice conformation.

Following another change in carcass standards, a further revision was made in June, 1960. This major revision lowered both the quality and conformation requirements in the Prime and Choice grades. The conformation requirements in the Prime and Choice grades were lowered about one-half grade. The quality requirements for the very young lambs in both the Prime and Choice grades were reduced about one-half grade; in the more mature lambs, the Prime grade requirements were lowered about one full grade and in the Choice grade about two-thirds of a grade. Other changes limit the extent that superior quality may compensate for deficient conformation.

APPLICATION OF STANDARDS

The official standards for market sheep, developed by the United States Department of Agriculture, provide for segregation according to (a) use as slaughter animals or feeders; (b) class or sex conditions; (c) age group; and (d) grade, which is determined by the apparent relative excellence and desirability of the individual animal for a particular use.

SLAUGHTER CLASSES AND MARKET GROUPS

The classes of slaughter sheep are ram, ewe, and wether; the age groups are lambs, yearlings, and sheep. Definitions of the respective classes and age groups are as follows:

- (a) Ram. A ram is an uncastrated male ovine.
- (b) Ewe. An ewe is a female ovine.
- (c) Wether. A male ovine castrated when young and prior to developing the secondary physical characteristics of a ram.
- (d) Lamb. A lamb is an immature ovine, usually under 14 months of age, that has not cut its first pair of permanent incisor teeth.
- (e) Yearling. A yearling is an ovine usually between one and two years of age, that has cut its first pair of permanent incisor teeth but has not cut the second pair.
- (f) Sheep. A sheep is an ovine, usually over 24 months of age, that has cut its second pair of permanent incisor teeth.

GRADE FACTORS

The specific grade of a slaughter lamb or sheep is determined by a composite evaluation of two general considerations which influence carcass excellence, (1) conformation and (2) fatness, maturity, and other factors responsible for differences in quality of the lean flesh.

Conformation refers to the general body proportions of the animal and to the ratio of meat to bone. Although primarily determined by the inherent muscular and skeletal systems, it is also influenced by the degree of fatness. Excellent conformation in slaughter lambs and sheep is denoted by a compact, wide-topped, straight-lined, thick-fleshed individual that is deep and full in the twist. Fullness and thickness should be especially evident in the portions of the body producing the more desirable cuts of meat--loin, rack, and legs.

In grading slaughter lambs and sheep, quality of the lean flesh must necessarily be evaluated indirectly from consideration, primarily of the quantity, distribution, and type of fat or finish in relation to the maturity of the animal being graded. Limited consideration is also given to such factors as character of bone and smoothness and symmetry of body. Finish is evaluated by noting variations in the fullness and apparent thickness of the fat covering over the back, loin, ribs, and legs. A high degree of desirable finish is evidenced by a thick, firm, smooth layer of fat which is uniformly distributed over the body.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The determination of the carcass grade that the slaughter animal will produce requires the exercising of well-regulated judgment. Each animal presents a different combination of the grade-determining factors. Animals frequently have characteristics associated with two or more grades. Therefore, a composite evaluation of all the inherent physical characteristics is essential for accuracy in determining grade.

The accurate determination of the grade of a slaughter lamb or sheep requires handling in addition to visual observation. The length and density of the fleece varies greatly with individuals and the thickness and firmness of the flesh covering of woolled lambs and sheep can only be roughly estimated without handling. The technique used in handling usually varies with the degree of precision in mind as well as the experience of the grader. Experienced graders may find one quick handling satisfactory. This usually consists of placing one open hand over the back and ribs in simultaneous motion. The thumb extends just over the backbone, while the fingers, which are held close together, cover the rib section and pressure is applied very lightly with a slight lateral and forward and backward motion. The generally accepted technique of handling sheep where time permits, and especially when noting slight differences between individuals, is to handle forward from the dock to neck with the open hand, fingers together, laid flat and with a slight lateral motion. Both hands may then be used on each side in a similar manner to determine the fleshing over the shoulders, ribs, and hips. Regardless of the method, considerable experience is necessary in handling lambs or sheep to accurately determine the grade.

Although the market designation of slaughter lambs and sheep is usually made by classes, the standards are intended to apply to all classes without regard to sex condition. However, animals which have thick heavy necks and shoulders typical of uncastrated males are discounted in grade in accord with the extent to which these characteristics are developed. Such discounts may vary from less than half a grade in young lambs in which such characteristics are barely noticeable to as much as two full grades in mature rams in which such characteristics are very pronounced.

The standards for each of the various grades of slaughter lambs and sheep describe only animals with a relatively similar development of conformation and quality factors and which also represent the lower limits of each grade. No attempt is made to describe the numerous combinations of grade factors which may meet the minimum requirements for a particular grade. However, examples of the extent to which superiority in quality may compensate for deficiencies in conformation, and vice versa, are indicated for each grade.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR OFFICIAL UNITED STATES STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF SLAUGHTER LAMBS

PRIME

Lambs possessing the minimum requirements for the Prime grade are moderately lowset and blocky and thick-fleshed. They are moderately wide over the back, loin, and rump. Shoulders and hips are usually moderately smooth. The twist is moderately deep and full and the legs are moderately large and plump. They generally present a well-rounded appearance due to a slight fullness or plumpness over the crops, loin, and rump. Relatively young lambs, under seven months of age, tend to have a moderately thin fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are readily discernible. Older, more mature lambs have a slightly thin fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are slightly discernible. Prime lambs exhibit evidences of rather high quality. The bones tend to be proportionately small, the joints tend to be smooth, and the body tends to be trim, smooth, and symmetrical.

To qualify for the Prime grade, a lamb must possess the minimum qualifications for finish regardless of the extent that its conformation may exceed the minimum requirements for Prime. However, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Prime grade may compensate, on an equal basis, for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Prime as indicated in the following example: A lamb which has evidences of finish equivalent to the midpoint of the Prime grade may have conformation equivalent to the midpoint of the Choice grade and remain eligible for Prime. However, in no instance may a lamb be graded Prime which has a development of conformation inferior to that specified as minimum for the Choice grade.

CHOICE

Lambs possessing the minimum requirements for the Choice grade tend to be slightly lowset and blocky and thick-fleshed.

They tend to be slightly wide over the back, loin, and rump. The shoulders and hips are usually slightly smooth but may exhibit a slight tendency toward prominence. The twist tends to be slightly deep and full, and the legs tend to be slightly thick and plump. Relatively young lambs, under seven months of age, have a thin fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are moderately prominent. Older, more mature lambs have a moderately thin fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are slightly prominent. Choice lambs usually present a moderately refined appearance.

A lamb which has conformation equivalent to at least the mid-point of the Choice grade may have a development of finish equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Good grade and remain eligible for Choice. Also, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Choice grade may compensate, on an equal basis, for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Choice as indicated in the following example: A lamb which has a development of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Choice grade may have conformation equivalent to the mid-point of the Good grade and remain eligible for Choice. However, in no instance may a lamb be graded Choice which has a development of conformation inferior to that specified as minimum for the Good grade.

GOOD

Lambs possessing the minimum requirements for the Good grade are moderately rangy and upstanding and thin-fleshed. They are slightly narrow over the back, loin, and rump. Hips and shoulders are moderately prominent. The twist is slightly shallow and the legs are slightly small and thin. Relatively young lambs, under seven months of age, have slightly more than a very thin, uneven fat covering over the back, loin, and upper ribs. In handling, the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are prominent. Older, more mature lambs have slightly more than a thin fat covering over the back, ribs, and loin. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are rather prominent. Lambs of this grade may present evidences of slightly low quality. The bones and joints are usually moderately large, and the body is somewhat lacking in symmetry and smoothness.

A lamb which has conformation equivalent to at least the mid-point of the Good grade may have a development of finish equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Utility grade and remain eligible for Good. Also, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Good grade may compensate for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Good on the basis of one-half grade of superior finish for one-third grade of deficient conformation as indicated in the following example: A lamb which has a development of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Good grade may have conformation equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Utility grade and remain eligible for Good.

However, in no instance may a lamb be graded Good which has a development of conformation inferior to that specified as minimum for the Utility grade.

UTILITY

Lambs meeting the minimum requirements for the Utility grade are very rangy and angular. They are very thin-fleshed, very narrow over the back, loin, and rump, and very shallow in the twist. The hips are very prominent and the shoulders are usually open, rough, and prominent. The legs are very small and thin, and present a slightly concave appearance. Regardless of age, Utility lambs show no visible evidence of fat covering. In handling, bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are very prominent. Utility grade lambs are of rather low quality. The bones and joints are proportionately large and the body is very rough and unsymmetrical.

A lamb which has conformation equivalent to at least the mid-point of the Utility grade may have a development of finish equivalent to the maximum for the upper one-third of the Cull grade and remain eligible for Utility. Also, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Utility grade may compensate for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Utility on the basis of one-half grade of superior finish for one-third grade of deficient conformation as indicated in the following example: A lamb which has a development of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Utility grade may have conformation equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Cull grade and remain eligible for Utility.

CULL

Typical Cull grade lambs are extremely rangy, angular, and thin-fleshed and extremely narrow and shallow bodied. Shoulders and hips are very prominent. The legs are extremely small and thin and present a very concave appearance. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are extremely prominent and the entire bony framework is very evident. The general appearance is that of low quality. The relative proportion of meat to bone is quite low, joints appear large, and the body is very unsymmetrical.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR OFFICIAL UNITED STATES STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF SLAUGHTER YEARLINGS AND SHEEP

PRIME

Slaughter sheep older than yearlings are not eligible for the Prime grade.

Yearling sheep possessing the minimum requirements for the Prime grade are moderately lowset and blocky and thick-fleshed. They are moderately wide over the back, loin, and rump. Shoulders and hips are usually moderately smooth. The twist is moderately deep and full, and the legs are moderately large and plump. There

is a rather distinct fullness or plumpness evident over the crops, loins, and rump which contributes to a well-rounded appearance. There is a slightly thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are hardly discernible. Prime slaughter yearling sheep exhibit evidences of rather high quality. The bones tend to be proportionately small, the joints tend to be smooth, and the body tends to be trim, smooth, and symmetrical.

To qualify for the Prime grade, a yearling must possess the minimum qualifications for finish regardless of the extent that its conformation may exceed the minimum requirements for Prime. However, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Prime grade may compensate, on an equal basis, for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Prime as indicated in the following example: A yearling which has a development of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Prime grade may have conformation equivalent to the mid-point of the Choice grade and remain eligible for Prime. However, in no instance may a yearling be graded Prime which has a development of conformation inferior to that specified as minimum for the Choice grade.

Yearlings which are otherwise eligible for the Prime grade but which have excessive external fat are not eligible for Prime.

CHOICE

Slaughter sheep possessing the minimum requirements for the Choice grade tend to be slightly lowset and blocky and thick-fleshed. They tend to be slightly wide over the back, loin, and rump. The shoulders and hips are usually slightly smooth but may show a slight tendency toward prominence. The twist tends to be slightly deep and full and the legs tend to be slightly thick and plump. Yearling sheep have a slightly thin fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are readily discernible. Mature sheep have a slightly thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are slightly discernible. Choice slaughter sheep usually present a moderately refined appearance.

A sheep which has conformation equivalent to at least the mid-point of the Choice grade may have a development of finish equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Good grade and remain eligible for Choice. Also, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Choice grade may compensate, on an equal basis, for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Choice as indicated in the following example: A sheep which has a development of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Choice grade may have conformation equivalent to the mid-point of the Good grade and remain eligible for Choice. However, in no instance may a sheep be graded Choice which has a development of conformation inferior to that specified as minimum for the Good grade.

Yearlings which are otherwise eligible for the Prime grade but which have excessive external fat are included in the Choice grade. Sheep which are otherwise eligible for the Choice grade but which have excessive external fat are not eligible for Choice.

GOOD

Slaughter sheep possessing the minimum requirements for the Good grade are slightly rangy and upstanding and thin-fleshed. They are slightly narrow over the back, loin, and rump. Hips and shoulders are moderately prominent. The twist is slightly shallow and the legs slightly small and thin. Yearling sheep have slightly more than a moderately thin fat covering over the back, loin, and upper ribs. In handling, the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are rather prominent. Mature sheep have a slightly thin fat covering over the back, ribs, and loin. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are slightly prominent. Sheep of this grade may present evidences of slightly low quality. The body is somewhat lacking in symmetry and smoothness.

A sheep which has conformation equivalent to at least the mid-point of the Good grade may have a development of finish equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Utility grade and remain eligible for Good. Also, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Good grade may compensate for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Good on the basis of one-half grade of superior finish for one-third grade of deficient conformation as indicated in the following example: A sheep which has evidences of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Good grade may have conformation equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Utility grade and remain eligible for Good. However, in no instance may a sheep be graded Good which has a development of conformation inferior to that specified as minimum for the Utility grade.

UTILITY

Slaughter sheep meeting the minimum requirements for the Utility grade are very rangy and angular. They are very thin-fleshed, very narrow over the back, loin, and rump, and very shallow in the twist. The hips are very prominent and the shoulders are usually open, rough, and prominent. The legs are very small and thin and present a slightly concave appearance. Regardless of age, Utility grade slaughter sheep show no visible evidences of fat covering. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are so thinly covered that they are very prominent. Utility grade slaughter sheep are of rather low quality. The bones and joints are proportionately large and the body is very rough and unsymmetrical.

A sheep which has conformation equivalent to at least the mid-point of the Utility grade may have a development of finish equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Cull grade and remain eligible for Utility. Also, a development of finish which is superior to that specified as minimum for the Utility grade may compensate for a development of conformation which is inferior to that specified for Utility on the basis of one-half grade of superior finish for one-third grade of deficient conformation as indicated in the following example: A sheep which has a development of finish equivalent to the mid-point of the Utility grade may have conformation equivalent to the minimum for the upper one-third of the Cull grade and remain eligible for Utility.

CULL

Typical Cull grade sheep are extremely rangy, angular, and thin-fleshed and extremely narrow and shallow bodied. Shoulders and hips are very prominent. The legs are extremely small and thin and present a very concave appearance. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are extremely prominent and the entire bony framework is very evident. The general appearance is that of low quality. The relative proportion of meat to bone is quite low, joints appear large, and the body is very unsymmetrical.

